

Australian Natural History Medallion 2007

Jeanette Covacevich AM, PSM

The winner of the 2007 Australian Natural History Medallion is Jeanette Covacevich, who was responsible for the Queensland Museum's herpetological collection for 35 years. By actively promoting the expansion of the reptile and frog collections (increasing it from about 7 000 to approximately 60 000 specimens), she played a major role in recognising and documenting the state's biodiversity. Her research focused largely on the taxonomy and zoogeography of Australo-Papuan reptiles, particularly rainforest, heath and desert faunas. However, Jeanette's research interests extend beyond herpetology. Among her publications are papers on Aboriginal history, medicine (envenomation), mammals and palm trees.

After completing a BA in English, Geography and Zoology at the University of Queensland in 1966, she progressed through the positions of Museum Cadet, Assistant Curator and Curator (Reptiles). Her MSc was awarded in 1977 for an Environment Studies thesis titled 'Visitors to the Queensland Museum: a survey of attitudes to the museum and its visitors'. In 1978 Jeanette became Senior Curator (Reptiles,) and then Senior Curator (Vertebrates) in 1992.

Through an 'open access' policy to the collections in her care, Jeanette has contributed to the work of others by providing specimens for use in their projects – revising the systematics and taxonomy of Australia's reptiles; analysing aspects of reptile ecology based on gut and gonad examination; publication of natural history and identification guides; tracking the history of the introduction and spread of chytrid fungus to Australia; and creating DNA profiles to inhibit wildlife smuggling.

Jeanette Covacevich has named 30 new reptile species, including one fossil from Riversleigh, and was instrumental in the rediscovery of the Western Taipan *Oxyuranus microlepidotus* (the world's most venomous terrestrial snake). An earthworm, several spider species, a frog,

and a gecko have been named to recognise her contributions.

A long association with the medical profession, through acting as an expert consultant to hospitals in the area of snake envenomation, has helped to save lives through the provision of specialist zoological knowledge. Jeanette has lectured on these topics to the Queensland Ambulance Service, St John Ambulance Australia, at many medical conferences, and to medical students of the University of Queensland.

A number of organisations have recognised Jeanette's contributions: in 1991 she received the St John Priory Vote of Thanks for voluntary teaching regarding snakes and snakebite. Her highest recognition came in 1995, when she became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM), in the General Division. The citation was for service to science, particularly in the fields of herpetology and conservation. In 2002 she received the Queensland Museum Medal for promoting the reputation of the museum at both local and national levels, and in the following year was awarded the Public Service Medal (PSM). The Queensland Naturalists' Club awarded Jeanette its Queensland Natural History Award in 2003 for her research on taxonomy of reptiles, maintenance of significant biological collections, collaboration with other scientists and voluntary teaching work on behalf of community groups.

She has played a key role in documenting the range and status of many endangered, rare, or threatened vertebrates, and has been a champion for conservation of bioregions such as the Brigalow Belt, the Wet Tropics and North Stradbroke Island.

Numerous societies have benefited from Jeanette's committee roles: Australian Society of Herpetologists (President 1988-90); Royal Society of Queensland (Secretary 1974-79 and President 1993-96); Stradbroke Island Management Organisation (Secretary 1978-84) and Marks Hirschfield Medical Museum, University of Queensland (2001 – 2002).

In addition to these positions, Jeanette has served on the Scientific Advisory Committee, Environmental Protection Agency; Scientific and Clinical Immersions Sub-Committee, DPI Animal Ethics Committee, and Australian Medical Association Medical Ethics Committee, Queensland. She has been an active member of the Queensland Naturalists' Club and Rainforest Conservation Society of Queensland.

In a publication record commencing in 1971, Jeanette Covacevich has produced 102 scientific papers as sole, senior or joint author. In addition, there have been eight books as author or editor, nine book chapters, numerous popular articles, films and a website.

Since her retirement, Jeanette has intensified her voluntary activities, including the collection of road-kill vertebrates of value for the Museum collection; assistance at the Cooktown Botanic Gardens and the

Cooktown and District Historical Society; field trips with other naturalists with interests as diverse as orchids for illustration and photographing the local populations of Bennet's Tree Kangaroo; lectures to community groups; and the editing and review of scientific manuscripts.

The nomination for the Medallion was made by the Queensland Naturalists' Club and was accompanied by letters of support from members of the Queensland Museum, Environmental Protection Agency, Nature's Powerhouse-Cooktown Botanical Gardens, and the Royal Society of Queensland.

Ian Endersby

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Jeannette Covacevich (R) receives the 2007 Australian Natural History Medallion from Dr Jane Melville. Photo by Joan Broadberry.